The Flower of Persia: Botanical Language in Aeschylus’ "Persians"

Previous scholarship has shown that Aeschylus frequently uses botanical language in the *Persians* (Broadhead 1960, Hall 1996, Garvie 2009), and that this language could be linked to an archaic doctrine of ὕβρις about the consequences of wanton growth (Michelini 1978). As Michelini explains, because of too much nourishment (κόρος), a wanton (ὑβρίζον) plant unproductively expends all its growth on foliage rather than fruit, and is therefore ἄκαρπος—contributing no fruit in return for the cultivation received. Such a plant must be pruned (κολούειν) so that it can renew its production of fruit. Furthermore, Peradotto argues that Aeschylus utilizes botanical language to create a tapestry of motifs, images, verbal echoes, and metaphors to evince the moral state of the cosmos (Peradotto 1964). Of the eighteen botanical terms occurring in the *Persians*, Aeschylus favors the blossoming and swelling connotation evoked by the repetition of the word ἄνθος—a term shown to be polysemous (Clarke 2005). I argue that blossom (ἄνθος) is a leitmotif that connects the ruin of Xerxes with specific acts of ὕβρις (as demarcated by similar botanical terms throughout the play) committed against land and sea, and that this floral leitmotif culminates and even manifests itself etymologically (v.i. ἔξανθοῦσα) toward the play’s conclusion when Darius says, “Hubris which has blossomed produces the husk of ruin for which reason it reaps a most lamentable crop” (ὑβρις γὰρ ἔξανθοῦσ’ ἐκόρπωσε στάχυν / ὅτης, ὃθεν πάγκλαυτον ἔξαμαίθερος, Pers. 821-822). I show how Aeschylus prepares the audience to expect this proverb about ὕβρις with four occurrences of the ἄνθος leitmotif that correlate with four botanical categories metaphorically present within the text. Moreover, the ἄνθος leitmotif not only subordinates other botanical terms but also describes and accounts for a narrative pattern that progresses from apparent fecundity to realized infecundity through mowing and reaping.
These four stages of the narrative pattern depict the wanton growth of Xerxes’ Persian force (ὑβρίζειν), the pruning of wanton growth (κολούειν), the harvest of woes (θερίζειν), and the consequential fruitlessness resulting from wanton growth (ἀκαρπεῖν). The ὑβρίζειν stage begins with the parados, where the senescent chorus of Persians anxiously recollects the mightiness of the host of Persia as “the blossom of Persian land” (ἄνθος Περσίδος αἴας, Pers. 59). Shortly following the parados, the κολούειν stage begins when the messenger exclaims his shock and horror at the singular destruction of the Persian force as “the fallen blossom of Persians is dead” (τὸ Περσῶν δ’ ἄνθος οἴχεται πεσόν, Pers. 252). Bookending the messenger speech, the θερίζειν stage begins with the second entrance of the Queen—thematicaly marked by “blossoms. . . offsrping of the earth” (ἄνθη . . . γαίας τέκνα, Pers. 618)—and extends to the end of Darius’ speech. Finally, the ἀκαρπεῖν stage begins with the advent of Xerxes where the chorus recalls its original opening metaphor by apposition, “many men, the blossom of [Persian] country” (πολλοὶ φῶτες, χώρας ἄνθος, Pers. 925).

Because of the extraordinary defeat suffered by the Persians at Salamis, the ἄνθος leitmotif is elegantly appropriate as an image of nature, since Aeschylus describes the battle as if nature itself fights as an “ally of the Athenians” (γῆς ᾐμαχος, Pers. 792): “the island crags return the echo” of the Athenian battle hymn and “frighten the Persians” (Pers. 387-391); nature becomes a weapon when the Persians “are struck with stones” (πέτροισιν ἰράσοντο, Pers. 460); and, finally, nature requites Xerxes for yoking the stream of the Hellespont when the remnant Persian force attempts to cross the “ice” (κρυσταλλόπηγα) of the Strymon river, but the sun melts the ice with its “rays” (ἀὐγαῖς, Pers. 504). Such scenes depicting nature fighting against the Persians are connected to the botanical proverb for ὑβρις by other botanical terms subordinate to the ἄνθος leitmotif to show that Persia’s defeat became possible through the action of one man,
and that catastrophic defeat was inevitable according to the divine law of ὕβρις inherent to nature.

Bibliography


